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ABSTRACT

Life-table procedures and data from the 1973 Family Growth Survey are used in this paper to determine: (1) the cumulative probability that by a given age a child will have experiences a single-parent family as a consequence of marital disruption; (2) the cumulative proportion of these children experiencing either remarriage or age 18 by given durations after marital disruption; and (3) the average duration of experience in a single-parent family. Findings presented suggest that about a third of all children will spend some time in a single-parent family before age 16 as a consequence of marital disruption. Large differences are shown to exist in relation to race, education, and the age of the mother at the child's birth. Of those affected by disruption, a quarter reach age 18 or have their mother remarry within two years of disruption and about half are still in a one-parent family within five years. Subgroup differences in remarriage rates moderate differences in the experience of this status by education and age of mother but increase the differences by race. (Author/EB)

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CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF MARITAL DISRUPTION

Larry Bumpass and Ronald Rindfuss

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CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF MARITAL DISRUPTION

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August 1978

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ABSTRACT

This paper used life-table procedures and data from the 1973 Family Growth Survey to ask three basic questions: (1) What is the cumulative probability that by a given age a child will have experienced a single-parent family as a consequence of marital disruption? (2) Given a marital disruption, what is the cumulative proportion experiencing either remarriage or age 18 by given durations after disruption? (3) What is the average duration of experience in a single-parent family?

Estimates based on the early 1970s suggest that about a third of all children will spend some time in a single-parent family before age 16 as a consequence of marital disruption (children born between marriages are included in these estimates, but those born before their mother's first marriage are not). There are very large differences by race, education, and the age of the mother at the child's birth. These differences appear in the timing as well as the prevalence of marital disruption.

Of those affected by disruption, a quarter reach age 18 or have their mother remarry within two years of disruption; within five years about half are still in a single-parent family. Subgroup differences in remarriage rates moderate differences in the experience of this status by education and age of mother but increase the differences by race.

Children's Experience of Marital Disruption

The increasing frequency of marital disruption has drawn the attention of policymakers, demographers, and family sociologists. Clearly, major changes are occurring in the prospect that a marriage will be "until death." The divorce rate sharply increased in the late 1960s (Glick and Norton, 1973), and has now leveled off at an historically high plateau (Glick and Norton, 1977). Perhaps half of all recent marriages will experience a disruption, compared to less than a sixth for cohorts married 20 years ago (Preston, 1975).

Though seldom articulated, the implicit sociological and political interest in these trends in marital disruption centers on their implications for the lives of children. While there are indeed many social, psychological, financial, and legal issues when a childless marriage ends, such problems are compounded manyfold when children are involved. However regrettable the personal difficulties of adults might be, their lives are often judged to be their own business. But, there is a clear societal interest in the well-being of children that is reflected in the title given to the country's major welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and is also given explicit attention in proposed divorce reform laws (Bane, 1976, p. 103).

Furthermore, the rapid rise in divorce rates understates the extent to which children experience it. The proportion of divorces involving children jumped from 44 to 60 percent between 1950 and 1965; the number of children per decree increased from .8 to 1.3. Approximately one million children were involved in a divorce each year in the early 1970s.

As a consequence of these increases in both the rates of marital disruption and the involvement of children in this experience, transition between families of orientation is likely soon to become nearly as common as continuous socialization in a single family. While we must be careful not to pass judgment on this alteration in the life-cycle meaning of "family," it is imperative that we discover more about the correlates of intermarital and multiple-family experience, especially as they impinge upon the lives of children. There has not been a single national study of the scale of those in fertility or status attainment that addresses these issues--even though "family" and "socialization" are among the most central concepts in sociology.

IMPACT OF MARITAL DISRUPTION ON CHILDREN

The literature about the impact of marital disruption on children reports conflicting results. Some studies argue that there is little measurable impact of divorce on the lives of children (Goode, 1956; Burchinal, 1964; Bernard, 1971), while others have attributed all manner of social ills to this experience (e.g., Rainwater and Yancey, 1967).

In the short run, marital disruption (whether or not in addition to the preexisting discord) represents a period of family conflict and uncertainty in which children may be caught in the middle--torn between their emotional ties to the respective parents. This fact may often be, exploited by the parents, unwittingly or not, in their relationships with each other during this period. While the actual separation may be experienced as a relief from the preceding conflict, no one argues that

the discord which is signaled by separation is not an emotionally painful experience for most children involved.

The living arrangements and economic circumstances associated with divorce are more readily measurable than the emotional correlates, and hence less surrounded by debate. The immediate consequence of disruption for most children is a period in a single-parent family headed by the mother. Of children in currently broken families, 80 percent are living with their mothers, 6 percent are living with their father and most of the remainder are living with other relatives (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977).

Even though both parents may still have a judiciary relationship to their children, children experience a sharp decline in the financial resources available to them when their parents separate. Hoffman (1977) reports that there was a 30 percent decline in average income for women undergoing divorce or separation. As Brandwein et al. elaborate (1974), there are significant strains associated with the fact of a marked reduction in income, even if the new level is well above poverty. In addition to associated status loss, substantial alterations may be required in customary life style, perhaps the most significant of which is the frequent inability of the mother to retain the previous home. Moving under these circumstances is itself a strain, compounded by the fact that the move may generally be to a poorer neighborhood.

Less is known about the long-range economic and living-arrangement consequences of marital disruption for children. Most remain with their mothers; but some live with fathers, other relatives, and friends. Most women remarry, but some do not. The children of those who do not remarry are likely to live for a protracted period in a single-parent household.

But even for those whose mothers remarry, life may be different than it is for children in unbroken families. The implications of these differences are a part of the folklore, and they have not yet been systematically examined by social scientists. With the increasing prevalence of marital disruption, it is important to know the ways a child's life is changed by growing up with a step-parent, half-siblings, and a complex array of grandparents and relatives drawn from two marriages (Walker, 1977).

In terms of other long-term consequences, parental disruption has been shown to be associated with lower socioeconomic attainment (Duncan et al., 1972, pp. 63-66), with higher marital instability (Bumpass and Sweet, 1972), and with lower educational attainment (Hauser and Featherman, 1976).

In spite of the attention to the rising rate of disruption and concern with the effects on children, there has been little explicit analysis of the prevalence of children's experience with marital disruption. Vital statistics data annually report the number of divorces in which children are involved, and the number of children involved. However, these data are of limited value for estimating children's life-time experience with marital dissolution. They represent the proportion of children whose parents obtained a divorce in a given year, whereas it is the fact, and timing, of separation that are substantively most important. Many couples delay going through the time and expense of obtaining a divorce until one of the partners wishes to remarry, particularly among lower socioeconomic groups. In addition, vital statistics data do not include children whose parents' marriage was disrupted by death.

Another significant component of children's experience with marital disruption that is missed by divorce statistics arises from fertility during the period of disruption. Many children are born after the marital dissolution but before their mother remarries (Rindfuss and Bumpass, 1977). Among twice-married women in 1970, more than a fourth had given birth between separation and remarriage.

Data from the Current Population Surveys (CPS) are often used to describe the prevalence of one-parent families among children at a single point in time (e.g., Ross and Sawhill, 1975). Such a measure does not speak directly to the probability of experiencing the single-parent status because, at any point in time, many children will have left this status through the remarriage of the parent with whom they were living. The absence of date of separation for divorced women in the CPS impairs the dating of marital disruptions.

Using data from the 1967 Survey of Economic Opportunity, Bane (1976) reported that about a quarter of the 1900-1960 birth cohorts experienced a parental marital disruption before age 18.[1] She estimated that for recent birth cohorts this proportion will be about a third. (This estimate was based on multiplying by 18 the proportion of all children involved in divorce in recent years.) Glick and Norton (1977) cited similar estimates.

The present paper extends work in this area by addressing three questions: (1) What is the cumulative probability that by a given age a child will have experienced a single-parent family as a consequence of marital disruption? (2) Given a marital disruption, what is the cumulative probability that the mother will have remarried within a given number of years after the disruption? (3) What is the average duration of experience in a single-parent family? Those questions are

explored for the period 1955-73 and for different subgroups of the population.

DATA AND METHODS

This analysis is based on data from the 1973 Family Growth Survey (FGS) (National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 1978), a national probability sample of 9797 women under age 45 who had ever been married or who at that time were never-married mothers. We have obtained results which replicate those reported here in analyses using the 1970 National Fertility Study (Westoff and Ryder, 1977). The FGS data are used in this report because of the larger sample size, and because it was collected more recently.

In order to measure children's experience of marital events, a children's file has been created, in which each birth reported by the woman becomes a record on which all of the mother's data are retained, as well as information for that particular child. It should be noted that the number of times a woman is represented in this file is determined by the number of children she has had. Women with ten children will be represented ten times. This is as it should be, but it means that some of the independence of the information associated with the original sample is lost. In essence, an additional cluster was added to the sample when the children's file was created. This does not present a severe problem, but it needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the differences that are found. The alternative would be to create a data set in which children were the units sampled, even though the information would have to be collected from their parents. Such data would be expensive and difficult to collect.

We have not included the experience of premarital birth in these estimates, because our focus is on the role of marital disruption in the experience of a single-parent family. Obviously, premarital births should be included in any general consideration of children's experience of single-parent families.

The experience of intermarital birth (after separation but before remarriage) has been included, as has paternal mortality. While this is a rather minor factor among whites, it contributes more substantially to the experience of single-parent status among blacks (Sutton, 1977). For example, among children in the sample born 1955-59, 3 percent of the white children's fathers had died by 1973, compared to 6 percent of the black children's. The relative experience of family disruption between black and white children is, however, little affected by this factor.

Because we have a sample of mothers, we necessarily miss maternal mortality; our estimates are consequently biased downward by approximately 2 percentage points among whites and perhaps 5 percentage points among blacks. (These figures are based on life tables for all females, from NCHS, 1975, Tables #3 and 5. The rates are perhaps slightly lower among mothers.)

There is an additional downward bias in our estimates, resulting from cases where the date of the mother's marital disruption is missing. Some of these women experienced a disruption with children under the age of 18 and others did not. Disruptions which we cannot date are reported for the mothers of about 2 percent of the black children and about 1 percent of the white children. The divorce date was used in the absence of a date of separation for about 3 percent of the black children and less than one percent of the white children, a factor that somewhat biases upward the

age of the child at disruption. Similar missing data problems affect fewer than one percent of the remarriage dates for either blacks or whites. The overall effect of these omissions is quite small.

The sample of "children" includes those who are still under 18 as well as those who are older. Some of the parents of the children in the former group will eventually separate, although they have not yet done so. In other words, the younger children have an "open interval" during which they could experience marital disruption. These open intervals present certain analytical problems (see Rindfuss and Bumpass, 1977; Sørensen, 1975; Menken and Sheps, 1970). One option would be to restrict our attention to children who were over 18 at the time of the survey. However, this would not allow us to examine the effects of the recent upturn in marital disruption. The other option is to use a life-table procedure, which is what we have done. We examine the cumulative proportion experiencing a disruption by a given age, based on the age-specific rates observed at various ages prior to the date of interview. When we examine the conditional questions, "Given a marital disruption, what is the probability that the mother will have remarried within a given number of years since the disruption?" then two decrements (i.e., ways of "dying") will be used: (a) the remarriage of the mother and (b) the child attaining age 18.

Finally, it should be noted that there is no simple term to describe our dependent variable. For most children involved it is indeed the initiation of a period in a single-parent family, usually in a female-headed household. In the absence of an exact label, we will refer to the experience in this way even though we are fully aware that other alternatives are experienced by some children.

EXPERIENCE OF MARITAL DISRUPTION, 1971-1973

Table 1 shows the cumulative proportion by age experiencing a single-parent family as a consequence of marital disruption based on rates in the period 1971-1973. The implications of the high rates of separation and divorce in the 1970s can be clearly seen in this table. For example, the age-specific experience of white children implies that almost one out of six will experience a period of marital disruption before age five, and that one out of every three will have this experience before age 16. For blacks, the comparable proportions are substantially higher. Three out of every five black children will experience marital disruption before age 16, provided that the experience of 1971-1973 holds throughout their lifetime.

The large cumulative proportion of black children experiencing a disrupted family is a function of both higher rates of marital dissolution after the birth of the children and of intermarital fertility. The latter are reflected in the experience before age 1. In our prior analysis of intermarital fertility (Rindfuss and Bumpass, 1977), we suggested that the social policy implications of births between marriages were similar to those of premarital births. Table 1 again demonstrates that this is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored.

It must be remembered that the estimates in Table 1 are based only on births after the mother's first marriage. When premarital births are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that a majority of black children will experience a period of living in a single-parent family. When premarital births are included the estimates indicate that about three-quarters of all black children born in the early 1970s will

Table 1. Cumulative proportion of children aged 1-16 ever experiencing a disrupted family for the synthetic cohort[a] 1971-1973.

Age of Child	Total	White	Black
1 year	8%	6%	24%
2	12	10	29
3	15	13	34
4	17	15	38
5	20	17	43
6	21	18	45
7	23	20	48
8	25	22	49
9	26	23	51
10	27	24	52
11	29	25	52
12	30	27	55
13	31	28	56
14	32	29	56
15	35	30	57
16	35	33	59

[a]Estimates for ages 0-2 based on q_x values for children born in 1971-73, for ages 3-5 based on q_x values for children born in 1968-70, for ages 6-8 based on q_x values for children born in 1965-67, etc., to mothers under the age of 30.

spend some time in a single-parent family. The comparable figure for white children is about one-third.

Caution is in order, however, when interpreting either these period life tables shown in Table 1, or life tables based on marriages (Preston, 1975). Such period estimates share the well-known "period-cohort" problem associated with total fertility rates: because the period life tables are based on segments of experience from different cohorts, they may well overestimate the future experience of contemporary cohorts, to the extent that shifts toward earlier timing of disruption are occurring. Alternatively, if shifts towards the postponement of marital disruption were occurring, then the period life tables would underestimate the future experience of contemporary cohorts.

For the remainder of this paper we focus on cohort rates. This eliminates the uncertainty that always surrounds period rates, but introduces new problems, because the data used are from a cross-sectional survey of women aged less than 45. As is often the case in the analysis of data from fertility and family surveys, the upper age limit of the sample imposes constraints. If children, age m, are to be included in our analysis, they must have had mothers who were aged less than (45-m) at the time of the child's birth (Table 2). For example, children aged 15 in the year of the survey were necessarily born to mothers under the age of 30. Consequently, the older the child, the greater the bias towards a younger age of mother at birth. In order to minimize this bias, we have restricted our analysis of children's experience of marital disruption to children born to mothers under age 30, and our analysis of the probability of the mother remarrying to children whose mother's marriage disrupted before she was 35 years of age.

Table 2. Proportion of children whose mothers were eligible to be included in the 1973 Family Growth Survey.

Child's Year of Birth (a)	Age in 1973 (b)	Oldest Possible Age of Mother	Proportion of Children Born in Year (a) to Women Aged (b) or Younger	
			White	Black
1973	0	44	100.0%	100.0%
1972	1	43	99.9	99.9
1971	2	42	99.8	99.6
1970	3	41	99.4	99.3
1969	4	40	99.8	98.9
1968	5	39	98.3	98.3
1967	6	38	97.1	97.1
1966	7	37	95.7	95.7
1965	8	36	93.9	94.1
1964	9	35	92.0	92.4
1963	10	34	89.9	90.1[a]
1962	11	33	87.3	87.6[a]
1961	12	32	83.8	84.8[a]
1960	13	31	80.7	81.7[a]
1959	14	30	76.4	78.6[a]
1958	15	29	72.0	74.8[a]
1957	16	28	66.8	70.9[a]
1956	17	27	61.2	66.2[a]
1955	18	26	54.9	61.4[a]

[a]Nonwhite.
Source: Various Vital Statistics reports, 1955-1973.

THE TREND IN CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF MARITAL DISRUPTION

Table 3 shows the cumulative proportion experiencing a single-parent family as a consequence of marital disruption, by race and year of birth. Reading down each of the columns within race, one observes an increase in this experience over cohorts at each age for which comparisons can be made. The proportion experiencing a disrupted family by age 2 more than doubled from 5 percent for the 1956-58 cohort to 12 percent for the 1971-73 cohort. The increase among whites was quite regular (from 4 to 10 percent) whereas among blacks there is a rather sudden increase for the two most recent cohorts. The higher incidence among blacks is a product both of the higher proportion that begins life in this status because of intermarital fertility and of a somewhat steeper rate of increase thereafter.

The increases shown in Table 3 for both whites and blacks are dramatic; especially in contrast to the slight decline over previous cohorts noted by Bane (1976) as a consequence of a decline in mortality. Mortality has continued to decline since 1960, and thus the dramatic upward shift in children's experience of marital dissolution results from the higher number of marriages dissolved through discord. Current experience, then, is fundamentally different from the experience of children in single-family situations at the turn of the century: these days both parents are likely to be alive, but not living together. The implications of this shift have yet to be fully explored by sociologists.

Table 3. Cumulative proportion of children ever experiencing a disrupted family.

Year of Birth	Age of Child[a] 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	No. of Children
Total																	
56-58	3	5	7	9	11	12	13	14	15	16	18	19	21	22	24	26	2444
59-61	5	6	8	9	11	13	14	16	18	19	21	23	24	25			3045
62-64	5	7	9	11	13	15	17	19	20	21	23						3193
65-67	5	8	11	13	15	17	18	20									2865
68-70	7	10	13	15	17												2874
71-73	8	12															2424
White																	
56-58	2	4	6	8	9	10	11	12	13	15	16	17	19	19	21	21	1520
59-61	3	5	7	8	9	11	12	14	16	17	18	20	21	22			1857
62-64	5	6	8	9	11	13	16	17	18	20	21						1976
65-67	4	7	9	11	13	15	19	18									1720
68-70	5	8	10	13	14												1815
71-73	6	10															1505
Black																	
56-58	12	16	18	20	22	24	27	30	31	33	35	37	42	47	48	51	924
59-61	13	15	17	20	23	27	30	32	34	38	43	46	47	47			1188
62-64	12	15	18	21	23	27	29	32	34	36	36						1217
65-67	16	18	24	26	29	33	35	37									1145
68-70	23	29	33	37	42												1059
71-73	24	29															919

[a]Children born 1956-1973, to ever-married mothers under the age of 30.

SOCIAL DIFFERENTIALS IN THE EXPERIENCE OF A DISRUPTED PARENTAL MARRIAGE

Differentials in the cumulative experience of a disrupted family by ages 5, 10, and 15 are presented in Table 4, along with the median age at disruption.[2] Overall, about one-half of all disruptions occur to children under the age of 6. Not only is the disruption of the parents' marriage about twice as prevalent among black children, but black children are on the average about a year and a half younger at the time of this experience.

Within race, there are strong differences by education, associated primarily with higher rates among children of mothers who did not complete high school. For example, among whites 33 percent of the children of poorly educated mothers experienced a disrupted family by age 15, as compared to 20 percent of the children of mothers who completed high school. The social impact of this difference may be amplified by the fact that the children of the former were younger at the onset of disruption. These differences are evident as well between the two higher educational categories. The average age at disruption was 4.8 years among children of the most poorly educated mothers, compared to 9.5 years for the children of mothers who attended college.

A mother's age at birth of her child is correlated with education, but the differences by mother's age are even more pronounced. Children who were born to mothers under the age of 20 are over twice as likely to experience a disrupted family than are children born to mothers aged 25 and older (39 vs. 15 percent); furthermore, they are, on the average, six years younger at the time of disruption (4.8 vs. 10.8 years of age). These findings are directly relevant to current concerns with young motherhood. As we will observe shortly, the social impact of

Table 4. Differential effects of Mother's Characteristics on Proportion of Children Experiencing Marital Disruption

Mother's Characteristics	Cumulative Proportion with Disrupted Family by Age 10	15	Median Age at Disruption[b]	No. of Children[a]
		Total		
Total	14%	21% 28%	6.0 years	17,446
Education				
<12	21	31 38	4.5	6938
12	11	17 24	6.2	7583
>12	7	14 21	8.5	2925
Age at birth				
<20	21	32 39	4.8	8343
20-24	9	15 21	7.8	7381
>24	4	9 15	10.8	1722
		White		
Total	12	19 25	6.5	10,771
Education				
<12	19	28 33	4.8	3381
12	10	15 22	6.2	5232
>12	6	13 20	9.5	2158
Age at birth				
<20	19	29 36	4.8	4155
20-24	8	13 20	7.5	5328
>24	3	7 12	10.0	1288
Religion				
Catholic	9	14 19	6.5	3603
Non-Catholic	13	21 28	5.8	7168
		Black		
Total	28	40 52	5.0	6675
Education				
<12	32	43 57	4.9	3557
12	25	36 44	3.8	2351
>12	19	33 39	5.1	767
Age at birth				
<20	31	44 57	5.0	4188
20-24	23	33 42	4.0	2053
>24	16	25 31	9.4	434

Note: Life table procedures are used.

[a]Children born 1955-73, to ever married-mothers under the age of 30.

[b]Of disruptions before age 16.

latter differences is moderated somewhat by the higher remarriage rates and shorter periods of marital disruption among younger women.

When comparisons are made within age-at-birth categories, we find that the educational differences are reduced but that they nonetheless persist (not shown). Likewise the substantial differences between Catholics and non-Catholics in Table 4 are not a product of the older average age of Catholic mothers at childbirth.

DURATION OF DISRUPTION

The impact of marital disruption on the life circumstances of children depends not only on differences in its extent and the age of the child at the time of the disruption, but also on differences in the rates at which mothers remarry. We approached this issue by estimating the cumulative proportion of children either experiencing parental remarriage or reaching age 18. The results are expressed, in Table 5, as the proportion "surviving" these risks, because of the importance of the duration of the single-parent state. These results depend jointly on the rates at which mothers remarry and the ages at which children experience the disruption.

The proportion under 18 whose mothers remain unmarried declines rather rapidly following disruption. The proportion turning 18 or having their mother remarry is one-tenth within the first year, a quarter within the first 2 years and half within the first 5 years. Racial differences in remarriage rates have a clear effect on children involved in marital disruption. Five years after the disruption, the proportion of children under 18 still in the single-parent state is twice as high

among blacks as it is among whites; the difference is even greater after 10 years.

Table 5 indicates the length of time that children who are living with their mothers remain in a single-parent situation after marital dissolution. For the small proportion of children who remain with their fathers or who live with friends and relatives, Table 5 indicates only the length of time until the child's mother remarries or the child reaches 18.

There are several ways to evaluate these findings. For whites, one could observe either that almost two-thirds of the children's mothers have remarried within 5 years, or that over a third of the children are in a one-parent family for at least 5 years. The more pessimistic tone of the latter may be the most appropriate, since five years is a rather long time to experience this status, and since one sixth remain in this status after 10 years.

The implication that children spend a long time in a single-parent family is even stronger in the estimates for blacks, compounding the higher prevalence of single-parent experience for blacks: once a disruption occurs it is likely to last much longer. Four out of five remain under 18 without their mother remarrying for at least five years; for about half of the black children in the sample the circumstance of a disrupted family persists for essentially the remainder of their childhood years. It must be noted, however, that these data do not measure exactly the social circumstances of single-parent status. We know that a higher proportion of children of currently separated or divorced mothers live with relatives among blacks than among whites (7 vs. 1 percent--Sweet, 1974).

Table 5. Proportion of children remaining under 18 without their mother remarrying.

Child's Year of Birth	Years since Disruption 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Number of Children[a]
					Total						
55-59	89	75	63	55	48	42	38	34	31	27	1043
60-64	89	73	60	51	44	34	36	32	29	25	1389
65-69	89	74	62	54	46	41					1071
70-73	84	74									515
					White						
55-59	88	70	55	46	39	33	28	25	20	18	459
60-64	88	69	52	42	34	30	26	23	22	16	571
65-69	86	67	52	41	33	26					395
70-73	77	62									163
					Black						
55-59	97	93	90	84	79	75	71	71	68	68	584
60-64	96	92	89	87	83	79	74	66	62	62	818
65-69	96	94	92	86	79	79					676
70-73	95	95									

[a]Children born 1955-1973, to ever-married mothers under age 35 at the time of marital disruption.

And while living with the unmarried mother is the dominant experience, a wage-earning male, and social step-father may be present for many during periods that are measured here as falling between disruption and remarriage.

Reading down the rows of Table 5, it is hard to determine any trend in the duration of disruption for children who experience it. (It is important to bear in mind that this experience is affected by the child's age at disruption as well as by remarriage rates.) It is possible that there has been some decline in the duration of single-parent status among whites for the most recent cohort, but the number of children in this cohort is quite small.

Table 6 reports differentials in the proportion of children in the sample who remain under 18 without their mother remarrying at 2, 5, and 10 years after disruption. Also shown are estimates of the child's median duration in the disrupted state before reaching age 18. For blacks, this median is not calculable because of the very low remarriage rates. Finally, it is important to remember when examining this table that marriage rates are considerably higher for mothers whose children are born before marriage than the remarriage rates of separated or divorced mothers. So, if we were considering the duration of all single-parent experiences of children, the medians would be somewhat shorter.

Lower rates of remarriage among more-educated women (Sweet, 1973) are offset by the older age of children at disruption among these women. The primary difference, by education, is a shorter duration of disruption among the children of mothers who completed high school but did not attend college.

Table 6. Effect of various social characteristics on proportion of children under 18 whose mothers are not remarried by years after disruption.

	Proportion under 18 with Mother not Remarried			Median Duration in Disruption	No. of Children [a]
	2	5	10		
Total	74	46	28	4.4 yrs.	4018
White	68	35	16	3.2	1588
Black	93	82	65	[b]	2430
Mother's education					
<12	76	49	30	4.8	2249
12	71	41	22	4.0	1342
>12	76	47	31	4.4	427
Mother's age at disruption					
<25	70	38	20	3.8	1681
25-29	75	49	33	4.8	1378
30-34	81	56	35	7.2	959
Child's Age at disruption					
<5	73	46	29	4.4	2789
5-17	76	46	27	4.3	1229
Mother's religion (whites)					
Catholic	79	48	27	4.8	392
Non-Catholic	64	30	13	2.9	1196

[a] Children born 1955-1973, to ever-married married mothers under age 35 at the time of disruption.

[b] Not calculable because of low remarriage rates at older ages of children.

There is, however, a strong relationship between the age of the mother at disruption and how long the disruption lasts. In spite of the fact that children of older mothers tend to be older at the time of disruption, they still spend considerably longer in the single-parent status before their mother remarries or before they reach their 18th birthdays. The median duration of disruption before age 18 is about 4 years among children of women under age 25 at disruption, compared to 7 years among children of mothers over 30 at the time of marital disruption. Twenty percent of the former but 35 percent of the latter remain in this status for at least ten years. This reflects the considerably lower remarriage rates of older women and especially of older women with older children. There is little difference in the duration of disruption before age 18 by age of child at the disruption. This is because the lower remarriage rates of mothers of older children are offset by the fact that children who are older at the time of disruption have fewer years remaining before their 18th birthdays.

Children of Catholic mothers with disrupted marriages remain in the disrupted family status for an average of almost 5 years, compared to just over 3 years among children of non-Catholic mothers. This reflects two influences: Catholic mothers and their children tend to be older at time of disruption, and there are somewhat lower age-specific remarriage rates among Catholics. The latter is, perhaps, a consequence of Catholic doctrines regarding remarriage.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The analysis undertaken here is explicitly demographic. Cumulative rates of transtition are estimated for entrance to and exit from the

circumstance of having a mother who is not living with a husband. The data considered here cannot speak to the many issues concerning the short- and long-term impact on children's lives, though it is known that a period of relative poverty is a frequent correlate of this experience. The data do establish clearly that "family life" for a very substantial proportion of children departs markedly from a simple model of socialization in a "family of orientation." Glick and Norton noted that only 80 percent of the children in the United States were living with both of their natural parents in 1976 (1977). Our estimates indicate that over one-third of all children spend a portion of their childhood when their mothers are between marriages. Most of these will eventually be part of a second marriage. However, the average time spent "between marriages" before 18 is four and a half years, and for a substantial minority the experience lasts much longer.

The differences by race are so large that they make inescapable the conclusion that family experience differs substantially between the two groups. Much has been written on the subject already, and too often it has been insensitive to cultural alternatives. We want to emphasize that our estimates are no more than what they claim to be. They do not speak to alternative arrangements for either social or economic resources. They do indicate that a majority of black children born to ever-married mothers experience marital disruption. Such disruptions tend to occur at younger ages and to last much longer than is the case among whites.

Among whites as well, however, it is clear that a very substantial proportion of children experience life in a single-parent family followed by a second family. The time has come for sociologists to

examine fully the consequences of the new realities of family life for children.

NOTES

1. Estimates for premarital births and parental deaths were included. The estimates were necessarily based on date of divorce for remarried women because of the absence of separation date noted for CPS data.

2. This is a different measure from the average age of children in disrupted families, which, of course, is dependent upon rates of remarriage as well as on ages at disruption.

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